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ABSTRACT

This digest explores some of the reasons for spanking, examines its effectiveness, and suggests alternative discipline methods. Many parents believe that spanking will teach children not to do things that are forbidden, stop them quickly when they are being irritating, and encourage them to do what they should. Others believe nonphysical forms of discipline are ineffective. Research suggests, however, that spanking does not lead to improved behavior and that children feel resentful, humiliated, and helpless after being spanked. Research also indicates that spanking may have potentially harmful long-term effects, such as increased aggression, violent behavior, impaired learning, and depression. To be effective, discipline should be age appropriate. Suggestions for parents of infants include: (1) grasping an infant's hand instead of slapping; (2) trading a toy rather than forcing an object from the infant; (3) baby-proofing your living space; and (4) leaving the room when your temper flares (after making sure the baby is in a safe place). Suggestions for parents of toddlers include: (1) making sure the environment is safe; (2) avoiding direct clashes with the toddler; (3) using your size and strength to eliminate situations; and (4) diverting a slap to your knee rather than hitting the child. Suggestions for parents of older children include: (1) clapping your hands loudly to interrupt unacceptable behavior; (2) grasping a child's arms firmly, crouching down to his or her level, and talking calmly; (3) controlling your anger by walking away or calling a friend; (4) making sure the punishment is logically related to the incident; and (5) introducing the appropriate use of time-out. Suggestions for all ages include: (1) supporting good behavior; (2) announcing clear, simple family rules; (3) understanding the feelings behind a child's actions; and (4) talking with your children if you decide to abandon spanking and try a different discipline method. (LPP)

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The Debate over Spanking

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Spanking is one of the most controversial discipline methods. On one side of the debate are parents who believe it is all right to spank their children. On the other side are those who think that children should never be spanked. Somewhere in the middle are parents who believe that spanking should only be used in particular instances (e.g., when the child runs into the street). Part of the reason for the debate is that parents and experts often define spanking differently. To some, spanking means "slapping a child on the buttocks" (Straus, 1995, p. 5), while others consider spanking a generic term for any corporal punishment that does not cause an injury, such as slapping a child's hand for touching something forbidden or dangerous.

The purpose of this digest is to explore some of the reasons for spanking (using the general definition of any corporal punishment that does not cause an injury), to examine the effectiveness of spanking, and to suggest alternative discipline methods.

Reasons for Spanking

While many adults would argue that hitting people is wrong, spanking children continues to be used as an acceptable form of discipline because many parents think spanking will teach children not to do things that are forbidden, stop them quickly when they are being irritating, and encourage them to do what they should (Leach, 1996). Some parents also believe that the nonphysical forms of discipline, like time-out, do not work (Samalin & Whitney, 1995). Spanking is also a practice used more in some areas of the country than others (primarily in the southern United States) and in some cultures more than others (Flynn, 1996; Scarr, 1995).

Effectiveness of Spanking

While spanking may relieve a parent's frustration and stop misbehavior briefly, according to the American Academy of Pediatrics (1995), researchers suggest that spanking may be the least effective discipline method. To test this hypothesis, researchers surveyed parents, with the assumption that if spanking worked, children who were spanked would learn to behave better over time so that they would need punishing less frequently (Leach, 1996). However, the results showed that families who start spanking before their children are a year old are just as likely to spank their 4-year-old children as often as families who do not start spanking until later. Thus, children appear not to be learning the lessons parents are trying to teach by spanking.

Spanking may be ineffective because it does not teach an alternative behavior (American Academy of Pediatrics, 1995). In fact, children usually feel resentful, humiliated, and helpless after being spanked (Samalin & Whitney, 1995). The primary lesson they learn appears to be that they should try harder not to get caught.

Spanking also sends the wrong message to children (Samalin & Whitney, 1995). Spanking communicates that hitting is an acceptable way to solve problems, and that it is all right for a big person to strike a smaller one. In addition, when children are spanked, they may know that they have done something wrong, but in many cases, they are too young to understand the lesson. It is a very difficult message for any adult or child to understand: "I hurt you because I don't want you hurt."

Finally, when spanking is the primary discipline method used, it may have some potentially harmful long-term effects such as increasing the chances of misbehavior, aggression, violent or criminal behavior; impaired learning; and depression (Straus, 1995).

Alternatives to Spanking

One reason parents spank is that they are not aware of other effective strategies for changing children's undesirable behavior. To be effective, discipline that is appropriate for a child's age should be used. Ineffective methods are often based on unrealistic expectations about what children are capable of learning. Parents may find the following age-appropriate discipline suggestions useful alternatives to spanking.

Suggestions for Parents of Infants

Infants respond impulsively to many situations without a real understanding of their surroundings and abilities. Spanking will only cause fear and anxiety in children who do not yet understand such concepts as consequences and danger.

1. When there is danger, grasp an infant's hand instead of slapping (Leach, 1996).
2. When the infant is holding something that you do not want him to have, trade a toy instead of forcing the item from him (Leach, 1996). He will only hold on tighter if you try to take something away.
3. Baby-proof your living space so that there is nothing dangerous or breakable in reach (Ruben, 1996; Samalin & Whitney, 1995).
4. Leave the room if you feel your temper flaring, making sure that the baby is in a safe place like a playpen (Leach, 1996).

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Suggestions for Parents of Toddlers

Disciplining toddlers requires a tremendous investment of time, energy, and patience, so it is important to find effective and appropriate techniques (Ruben, 1996). For example, it will not be effective to tell toddlers not to play with items that are dangerous, such as the stove, because they do not understand the consequences (Samalin & Whitney, 1995). Spanking, however, will not clarify the consequences either. Instead, children may learn from spanking that "I'm a bad person," rather than "I did a bad thing." You must use discipline methods consistently or your child will learn that you are not serious.

1. Make sure the environment is safe by removing any harmful or dangerous objects (Samalin & Whitney, 1995). It is natural for toddlers to want to explore their environment. Always supervise toddlers; it is unrealistic to expect a toddler to play safely without adult supervision for more than a few minutes (Leach, 1996).
2. Avoid direct clashes with toddlers, which will only make both of you angry and frustrated. Instead, try a diversion or distraction (Leach, 1996). Many problem situations can be eased with something funny or unexpected, such as tickling a mildly upset child (Ruben, 1996).
3. Use your size and strength to eliminate situations (Leach, 1996). Simply lift a child out of the bath or carry a child who refuses to walk.
4. If you start to deliver a slap, divert it to your knee or a table (Leach, 1996). This sound will interrupt the behavior without hitting the child.

Suggestions for Parents of Older Children

1. When you start to feel angry with your children, clap your hands loudly (Leach, 1996). The sound will interrupt their behavior.
2. If your child refuses to listen to you, crouch down to his level, grasp his arms firmly so he cannot avoid looking at you, and then talk calmly (Leach, 1996).
3. Since spanking does not occur in calm, rational moments (Samalin & Whitney, 1995), it is especially important to control your anger to prevent "losing it." You can walk away, hit a pillow, call a friend, or write a note. Once you have cooled down, you will probably feel less inclined to spank.
4. If you feel you must punish your children, make sure the punishment is logically related to the incident so that they can learn the lesson you want to teach (Leach, 1996). For example, if your child rides her bike onto a road that is forbidden, take the bike away for the afternoon. This punishment teaches her that roads can be dangerous, that you are concerned for her safety, and that you will enforce safety rules as long as they are needed. Taking away TV, dessert, or spanking will not teach bike safety.
5. Introduce the appropriate use of time-out (Ruben, 1996). Time-out used as a punishment is controversial. When used to allow a few minutes for a child—and a parent—to regain control of their emotions, it can be effective in stopping a cycle of inappropriate behavior.

Suggestions for All Ages

1. Support good behavior. Hugs and praise will go a long way (Ruben, 1996).
2. Try an ounce of prevention (Ruben, 1996). Effective discipline means announcing clear, simple family rules (the fewer, the better) at a time when children are calm and listening.
3. Try to understand the feelings behind your child's actions (Ruben, 1996). Ask older children why they are angry. When an infant cries, ask yourself: Does she want to be held? Is her diaper wet? Is she hungry?
4. Share your change of heart (Ruben, 1996). If you have spanked your children in the past, but have decided that you will stop, talk to your children about your decision. This lesson can be valuable for your whole family.

Conclusion

The question of whether or not parents should spank their children is not easy to answer. However, spanking is only one of the factors that needs to be considered in the overall discipline process. In deciding how to discipline their children, parents should first ask, "what do I want to accomplish?" If the answer is "teach my children how to make good choices on their own," spanking may not be an issue.

For More Information

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